

I'm "Sticks" and I am a recovering addict in my 14th year in recovery and would like to share with you my experience, strength and hope for my recovery from addiction as well as for mental illness.

I grew up living in a household with the most rigid rules under ultra "culture oriented" parents. I was to be making straight A's in school (just like my brother) and never absent. I was to go to church every Sunday (or else God would punish me.) I was to be a perfect, model son at all times. While my brother was somehow able to meet their high hopes, I wasn't. I was never "good enough" for their standards and a disappointment to the family. Each year, I'd give it one more shot at making those good grades and each year I'd fail. I was lucky to be able to hang for a week until my willpower gave in.

As years went by, my grades began dropping. My future looked worse and worse and I was becoming more and more depressed.

I began drinking alcohol at the age of 15. Though it did not hook me right away it did steer me toward the direction of street drugs. I was introduced to pot at the age of 16 and eventually to glue sniffing. Glue sniffing allowed me to not feel those feelings I do not want to feel. And therefore became my best friend for the next year and a half. My insanity was becoming more and more apparent through my actions.

At the age of 17, I was checked into a mental hospital for the first time. I hated it. It was boring, I was numb and my only interest was to get high and they would not let me do so. I was given my first diagnosis of schizophrenia.

I was eventually discharged but continued to use, going in and out of hospitals for the next several years. I began smoking cocaine at the age of 19. By then, I had no friends. Even my parents were fed up with me. I continue to use nonetheless. It was the year 1992 and by then my new diagnosis was schizoaffective disorder. I was destined to die an addict with no hope.

I walked into the rooms of Narcotics Anonymous (NA) defeated. Everyone in the rooms who shared was talking about hope and the gift of recovery and all the wonderful things that recovery was about. It didn't take me long to acknowledge my addiction.

I continue to attend meetings until on May 23, 1993, I made the ultimate decision to stay clean one day at a time (the best decision that I've ever made in my whole life). I was convinced that I had my limitations (considering I had a mental illness,) but at the very least, if the best I can do was to stay off drugs and alcohol, at least I can do that.

The first three years was the most difficult years of my recovery. I not only had to struggle with the disease of addiction, but also a chemical imbalance and needed all the help I could get. I not only consulted with my sponsor also with the pastor of my church. While speaking with him, he suggested that there may be a psychological aspect to schizoaffective disorder as well as a chemical imbalance (though I'm not satisfied with the term "chemical imbalance", I will continue to use it in reference to the subject). The fact that even people who have a mental illness can deliberately act with malice proves we truly have free will. Though we may or may not be responsible for our IGNORANCE, we are accountable for our AWARENESS.

I continued to go in and out of hospitals for depression in my early recovery. One day, while lying down and feeling down and out, the thought dawned on me. Isn't it bad enough I have a "chemical imbalance" ? Why should I make matters worse, and continue to feel sorry for myself? This self-pity isn't doing anybody any good but most of all it is not doing me any good. Don't get me wrong, there's nothing wrong with giving yourself

a break here and there (in fact, it is a necessity), but when it is taken to the extreme, it can be extremely harmful to one's recovery from active addiction as well as from "chemical imbalance".

My sponsor, at the time, never gave me any hassle about the hospitalizations because he did understand, that he would always stress that there was always a part I was playing. He was patient but strict. As someone who cared, he would not let me use my mental illness as an excuse to cop out. To this day, the part I cannot change about the mental illness is the physical chemical imbalance, and I tend to see things with inaccuracy. The part I can change is my action, my reaction, and my ability to change my perspective. He would always ask me what was going on when I'd call him up depressed. He explained to me that people don't become depressed, "because you have a chemical imbalance", we may be considerably more susceptible to be depression as opposed to people without a "chemical imbalance" but the truth is clinical depression or not, bipolar or not, there's obviously something causing our misery. To my understanding, depression is anger we direct toward ourselves. It was suggested that I write so that I could see what it is that makes me feel the way I do. For me to be able to identify the specific anger issues related to depression has been an invaluable tool in my recovery. To work on my depression from the inside out not only helped me to gain insight in depression, but it also endorsed a more insight into my "condition".

While working the steps, it was suggested by my sponsor that schizophrenia and bipolar disorder are man-made labels. If God did not come down and call me a "schizophrenic" or a "manic-depressive" personally, then, a label, it is (and besides, I consider God to be a Higher Authority than any psychiatrist anyways). These labels should be left for the purpose of medicine and no more. Just because the Creator made a little inaccuracy in the wiring of our brain does not mean the whole brain is no good (as a matter of fact, more than 99% of our brain is quite normal, chemical imbalance or not). And who are we to even assume a mistake in the Creator's part in the first-place? The Creator made the brain perfectly the way HE or She intended, and GOD MAKES NO MISTAKES! Use the part that works!

Before I continue, I would like to suggest to some of us who are taking medication to continue to do so as recommended by the doctor. Nothing I say is meant to be a substitute for medication. If a person who has diabetes and approaches problem not only by taking his insulin, but also by taking his insulin, exercising regularly and eating healthy, then a person with a dual diagnosis can utilize the 12 steps, in addition to taking his or her medication.

I usually use the "cast and broken leg" analogy. To take medication regularly is like wearing a cast. I must take it until the part of my brain needs healing heels. Just like I must wear a cast until my legs heels. As the doctor would recommend that I make small efforts to walk with on my leg on the cast, I must make efforts to work the staffs and do what I can, in addition to the medications they take. Unlike a cast, however, I might very well have to be a medication for the rest of my life. Perhaps in the future, financial health will improve to the point that I am taking a smaller dosage (formerly heels a little bit). Perhaps it won't. I don't know. Either way, it's OK. Having a chemical imbalance in taking medication doesn't change who I am.

The "highs" have been more difficult to understand than depression. It is difficult, often times, separate the anxiety, the nervousness and the restlessness from the mania due to this chemical imbalance. We could very well have had too much coffee or perhaps we are waiting impatiently for a phone call. If "normies" are allowed to be upset and why is it unnatural for us to be (especially when it is just)? Perhaps I can learn from these pseudo -- mania occurrences (which they are at times) and take a look at what actions is triggered these emotions. I feel it is extremely important to make strides in consciously working through our "pseudo -- symptoms" as it is in acknowledging our limitations. I believe the more we continue to live consciously, the less prone we are to go through our ups and downs by FORCE OF HABIT.

Living with schizophrenia has been more difficult than living with the bipolar disorder. As a person with schizophrenia, I sometimes relate with Helen Keller. While Helen Keller was blind and deaf, my BLINDNESS is to my inability to rationalize and touch base with reality. I must utilize every one of my five senses (and perhaps even my sixth sense) as a blind man uses walking sticks.

By observing and modeling "normal people." I'm able to differentiate between "normal" and the "abnormal" behavior. Utilizing what I observe, I give myself a reality check to make sure I am aligned with "normal" behavior (to a greater or lesser extent). I don't know exactly what "normal" is, but the guideline I use as "normal" is the similarities that all people have in the way they think, act and speak ("chemically imbalance" or not, addict or not).

Before we label our thoughts as paranoia, perhaps we can go through a checklist of questions to put things into perspective. As long as I haven't cheated on my tax return and have not robbed a bank, I think it's pretty safe to say there isn't anybody coming after me. I usually don't hear voices (except probably my mother nagging at me,) but sometimes, when I do, ignoring these voices seems to work (sometimes, even with my mother).

The most challenging part of a mental illness is socializing. During my conversations, I was frequently saying WRONG THING AT THE WRONG TIME AND FOR THE WRONG REASON and other statements inappropriate for given dialog. I am a firm believer in independence and autonomy, but let's face it: NO MAN IS AN ISLAND. As part of my recovery, I must learn a new "culture" and be a part of society and not stand out. I must learn society's culture in place of my own culture so that I'm not the only one who understands what I'm talking about.

I have never understood why and where my "chemical imbalance" originated from. Was I born with it? Did I acquire it through active addiction? Was I born "normal" but more susceptible to the risk of developing it? I can continue to ask these moot questions and never get an answer. Or do what I can despite it all. Yes I have this, but I feel the Creator has compensated generously by blessing me in other ways.

I am indebted to so many people both in Narcotics Anonymous, and in other organizations for sharing their insight to help me recover for my dual diagnosis condition. It can still be unclear as to what I can and cannot change. The only thing I recommend is do your best.